

The Disruption: a century and a half of historical interpretation

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Contemporaries were in no doubt that the story of the Disruption had to be recorded for posterity; it had to be accounted for; it had to be set fast in the memory of the people; it had to be gloried in or bemoaned. Those who swiftly penned accounts of it all, “plagued with an anxiety to testify to the unfailing consistency or orthodoxy of their own party”,¹ were irredeemably partisan, all too ready to select sources and to highlight particular events in order to gratify the partialities of their readerships. There were more-or-less official historical accounts, representing the “old” Moderates, the majority Evangelicals who went out in 1843, and the minority grouping of Evangelicals who remained in the Establishment and are usually referred to as the Middle Party. Robert Buchanan published the Free Church version in 1849, quickly followed by James Bryce’s Moderate account in 1850, each being prefixed by an elaborate reconstruction of Scottish church history since the Reformation, each seeking justification in a noble past for positions and policies they had adopted in the era of Disruption.² Not until 1859 did a Middle Party response come – and then in a shorter, pithier account which concentrated more immediately on the decade of controversy before 1843.³

¹ Remark by Donald Macleod in “Scotland and Disestablishment” in *Contemporary Review*, 64 (1893), 266.

² R. Buchanan, *The Ten Years’ Conflict, being the history of the Disruption of the Church of Scotland*, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1849): note that this implies a severance from the existing church rather than from the state. J. Bryce, *Ten Years in the Church of Scotland, 1833-43, with historical retrospect from 1560*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1850).

³ A. Turner, *The Scottish Secession of 1843: being an examination of the principles and narrative of the contest which led to that remarkable event* (Edinburgh, 1859). In the preface, at page v, Turner notes that the Secession of 1843, which embraced “a comparatively small number of the clergy in the Scottish Church”, demonstrated “the triumph of the constitutional principles of the Church of

In fact, Buchanan's *The Ten Years' Conflict* did not stand alone for long as representing the Free Church view of things; for the death of Thomas Chalmers at the Assembly in May 1847 was quickly followed by a remarkable biography of a remarkable life, mightily documented like Buchanan, soon also reissued in a cheap popular edition.⁴ Like Buchanan's account, Hanna's *Memoirs* also offered little place in its unfolding tale either to capriciousness or to uncertainty; for both, indeed, Chalmers and the new Free Church were to be revealed as God-given agencies following out an ordained and necessary plan to assert true religion in the land.

The Free Church seized every opportunity for self-advertisement and self-justification. The Assembly each year issued its *Debates and Proceedings*, an official record carefully revised in house and not dependent on "outside" reporting by journalists; the *Reports* of Assembly committees were also printed, and a new journal, *The Home and Foreign Record of the Free Church of Scotland*. Yet the bombardment of contemporaries, and of later historians, did not end there: the newspapers set up before 1843 to support the Evangelicals' Non-Intrusionist cause continued for some years, continuing to retail the wonders of the "Exodus from Egypt";⁵ and the church was to sponsor a group of new journals, such as *The Free Church Magazine*, the very influential *North British Review* and the short-lived *Lowe's*

Scotland ... leaving the Church of our fathers in the full possession of her valued privileges, and disencumbered from the influence of extreme views on either side" – and thus provides in his book a very different view of the Disruption from Buchanan's or Bryce's.

⁴ W. Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers, DD, LLD*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1849-52): cheap editions in two volumes, entitled simply *Memoirs*, were available from 1854 onwards.

⁵ The main Free Church supporters were: *The Scottish Guardian* (Glasgow), 1832-60; *The Witness* (Edinburgh), 1840-61; *The Banner* (Aberdeen), 1840-45; *The Dundee Warder*, 1841-45, becoming the *Northern Warder* and amalgamating with the *Dundee Courier* in 1886. In 1842, the *Witness* also included in the Non-Intrusionist press the *Dumfries Times*, *Inverness Herald*, *Perthshire Advertiser*, *Montrose Review*, *Greenock Advertiser* and *Caledonian Mercury* (see R.M.W. Cowan, *The Newspaper in Scotland: a study of its first expansion, 1815-60* (Glasgow, 1946), 243.

Edinburgh Magazine. More than that, from the outset it had been intended to provide for posterity a lasting memorial of the acts of sacrifice by the seceding ministers and their families; as early as 1847 the *Free Church Magazine* was brusquely enquiring what had become of the enterprise, for the editor saw in it an immediate value, that of reinvigorating the flagging financial commitment of its congregations to the schemes of the church.⁶ For once, however, the Free Church faltered. Not until the mid-1870s, when the very principles of the Disruption were under close scrutiny, did “that most sentimental of books”,⁷ Thomas Brown’s *Annals of the Disruption* see the light of day, to be joined by James Wylie’s *Disruption Worthies* and *Disruption Worthies of the Highlands*.

Even in the intervening years, if intermittently, the days of Disruption fervour and glory were vividly recalled in print. As death took its toll of the “Disruption Fathers” in the seceding ministry and of prominent Free Church laymen, biography after biography included fulsomely-documented accounts of the exciting days of the 1830s and early 1840s – notably, in the lives of laymen such as Makgill Crichton (1853), David Stow (1868), Alexander Thomson of Banchory (1869) and Hugh Miller (1871); and of prominent ministers such as Thomas Guthrie (1870) and William Cunningham (1871), soon to be followed by Robert Buchanan (1877), Alexander Duff (1878) and Robert Candlish (1880). In 1874, moreover, the Free Church found itself with much to be thankful for in the published *Journal, 1832-54* of Henry, Lord Cockburn, his generous comments on the secession being quarried unmercifully thereafter by Free Church protagonists (as they have been since by historians of nineteenth-century Scotland).⁸

Against this flood of recollection and commentary, the Established Church offered little defence. It continued publication of the *Home and*

⁶ This journal was edited in its early years by one of Candlish’s close allies, W.M. Hetherington, and gives good insights into the attitudes and thinking of the Candlish group.

⁷ G.D. Henderson, *Heritage: a study of the Disruption* (Edinburgh, 1943), 114.

⁸ There are perceptive comments on Henry Cockburn’s attitudes to religion, to evangelism and to the Free Church in K. Miller, *Cockburn’s Millennium* (London, 1975), 257-63.

Foreign Missionary Record which had been begun by the Evangelicals in 1839 but, after 1843, for each assembly it produced only spare and relatively uninformative volumes of *Acts and Reports* – so that the core debates in the Church Assemblies have to be reconstructed from the limited, friendly or mostly unfriendly, reports in newspapers, journals and annual registers. There was the merest handful of “dedicated” newspapers to match the string of Evangelical ones, and even Tory constitutionalist editors were not uniform in their support; meanwhile the Free Church and dissenter reporters alike ridiculed and reviled all Church activities. Not until *Macphail’s* was founded in 1849 did Churchmen feel that they had a “tied” journal of any reputation.⁹ But, in any case, they could offer nothing to match the fund of stories of the much-publicised hardship of the seceding ministers and their wives tearfully leaving their manse homes. What is at once noticeable, however, is the comparative lack of public commemoration of leading Moderates who had had significant roles to play in and after 1843.

Extraordinarily, only one of the “old Moderates”, James Robertson of Ellon, attracted a major biography; and only three Middle Party ministers – Robert Story of Rosneath (1862), the only one to have been in the ministry in the 1820s, Robert Lee (1870) and Norman Macleod (1874). But where were (and are) the biographies of any or all such Moderate leaders as Duncan Mearns, George Cook, Duncan Macfarlane, Paull of Tullynessle or Bisset of Bourtie, or indeed of John Lee or, most remarkably, of the lawyer John Hope? It is not our purpose here to explore why these men were left without biographers, although that is an interesting question in itself. What is clear is that their absence has been instrumental in leaving historians with a strangely imbalanced body of source-materials out of which they might begin to construct their views of the making of the Disruption and that has had its own unfortunate consequences.

The steady stream of polemical commentary from Free and Established Churchmen was momentarily interrupted in 1859 by two

⁹ Dr Robert Lee was much concerned by the comparative weakness of the Established Church in friendly publications, and had high hopes that *MacPhail’s Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal and Literary Review* would provide some counterweight.

very different books. Arthur Turner's *The Scottish Secession of 1843* attempted, to little or no avail, to staunch the self-glorification of the Free Church and the new assertiveness of the Auld Kirk: his Middle Party version was scorned by both, being too critical by far of the old Moderatism and its social and religious unconcern and much too well informed about the disputes *within* the body of Church Evangelicals in the 1830s, as well as being sharply aware of the younger leaders' management of affairs (for their own ends) in 1839-43. The same year saw, too, the publication of *A Church History of Scotland* by an Established Church minister, John Cunningham, of Crieff. The author was no controversialist, and declared that he had attempted to avoid "petty hatred" and wished not to sacrifice "truth to subserve a party basis". In the first edition Cunningham ended his tale in 1832-33 – "now we approach the region of living men, whose character is sacred, and therefore we reverently turn aside". When, in a second edition of 1882, he included a "proportionately full account" of the "lamentable secessions of 1843" and its aftermath, it was, typically, only a sedate, even dispassionate, outline of events.¹⁰ What Cunningham did not reveal was that, in the early 1870s, two developments had already thrust both the character and the historical meaning of the Disruption into a new and exacting public prominence.

Firstly, in 1873, a grudging end had been brought to ten years of negotiations between the Free Church and the United Presbyterians, this being forced on the Free Church leaders – Candlish, Buchanan and Rainy – by opposition from a minority led by James Begg. This Free Church minority had been incensed at the prospect of union with a voluntary, anti-state church, objecting vehemently that at the Disruption the Free Church had been clearly founded "on the Establishment principle" and that its members, as publicly declared by Chalmers in its first Assembly, were "not Voluntaries". Begg and his supporters threatened to apply to the civil courts, in the event of a final decision to unite, in order to have the whole property and assets of the Free Church retained by them as true and only legal heirs. Still

¹⁰ J. Cunningham, *Church History* (1859 edn.), i, page vii: (1882 edn.), i, preface: ii, 458-531.

smarting from the outcome of the Cardross case of 1859-63,¹¹ where the courts had acted on the basis that the Free Church was liable under the law of trust in Scotland, and should be treated only as a free association of individuals agreeing to act within the strict terms of the declared principles of its foundation document, the Free Church leaders very reluctantly gave way. What had not been expected was that the confrontation with Begg at once sparked off an intense and awkward debate within and outside the Free Church about just what were the "Disruption principles" or the "Free Church principles". Secondly, in 1874, when Disraeli's Conservative government abolished patronage, it was at once widely suggested that the primary cause of the Disruption had been removed, and hence the way was open to the reunion of the Free with the Established Church.

Candlish and his coterie immediately went on to the offensive. The government was attacked for not treating all sects equitably, the main argument being that the removal of patronage would give an unfair advantage to the Establishment. Above all, they insisted that patronage had not been the essential issue in 1843: the Disruption, it was loudly proclaimed, had really been one particularly dramatic moment in the age-old battle with the state over the matter of spiritual independence, traceable at least as far back as Melville's disputes with James VI and to the era of the Covenanters. The Free Church could thus have no truck with a domineering Erastianising state or with its lackey, the deeply Erastianised Church of Scotland.¹² It was certainly no coincidence that, just at this point, the *Annals of the Disruption* was published as a means by which to renew popular enthusiasm for the "release from Mammon" in 1843 and to bring back into congregational consciousness such poignant reminders of the struggles of the infant Free Church. These exchanges set the tone of the debate over the history of the making of the Disruption for the next twenty years.

¹¹ See F. Lyall, *Of Presbyters and Kings: church and state in the Law of Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1980), 90-101; A.M. Hunter, "The Cardross Case", *ante*, vii, (1941), 247-58.

¹² Sir Henry Moncrieff was a lively pamphleteer on the Free Church side, e.g. *The Identity of the Free Church Claims from 1838 to 1874* (Edinburgh, 1875), *The Free Church Principles* (Edinburgh, 1877).

Large numbers of younger ministers, none of whom had any personal recollection of the pre-Disruption controversies and of the Disruption years, flocked to support the Free Church leadership;¹³ especially Rainy, who was increasingly prominent, as he called for no retreat from that absolute demand for unlimited spiritual independence, which in his view had been at the core of the Claim of Right in 1842. Rainy's response to the ending of patronage, indeed, was to declare that the only possible basis for reunion with the state church was its immediate disestablishment and disendowment; he, for one, was ready to accept, implicitly at least, that the Free Church of the 1870s must identify itself with policies which would be at odds with the interpretation of Disruption principles outlined by Begg. In the middle of the 1870s there appeared a host of pamphleteers, all ready with their own reconstructions of the Ten Years' Conflict, generally set on using their vision of Disruption principles to highlight or to offset the unexpected difficulties in which the Free Church had found itself over the character of its origins.

Free Churchmen, as we have seen, tended to stress their own close identity with Melville and the Covenanters, and on the whole played down the church-state settlements of 1689-90 and 1705-07 (by doing so, intending to marginalise the Patronage Act of 1712); in contrast, pro-Establishment writers went out of their way to emphasise the pre-Union legal settlement of presbyterianism and long-standing evidence of a wide and popular support for the national religion in Scotland, while recalling the Church-Evangelicals' furious assault on voluntarism in the 1830s in the name of state-subsidised religion. Inevitably, Chalmers' famous, or notorious, statements in favour of the principle of Establishment in 1843 and his insistence that the new Free Church was neither voluntarist nor anarchistic figured prominently with pro-Establishment pamphleteers. Free Church protagonists countered that it was government which had provoked the ultimate crisis, that aristocratic ministries had deeply mistrusted an Evangelical-

¹³ Donald Macleod, *Contemporary Review*, 64 (1893), commented ruefully on the extremism of many younger Free Church ministers who had learned what they knew about the Disruption only from the tendentious statements of Free Church propagandists.

led church marked out by its democratic ideals, and that in Commons and Lords alike it had been majorities of English members who – ignorant of or prejudiced against a distinctive Scottish tradition in church-state relations – has acted to return the church in Scotland to state controls unknown since the days of James VI and Charles I. Official records and the documentation in biographies were well used by both sides.

Establishment writers were notably ready with quotations from Chalmers' speeches and writings, contrasting his ideals of the 1830s and 1840s with the vendetta which his erstwhile younger colleagues, such as Cunningham and Candlish, had launched against the national church. Led by Robert Story, and bitingly informed by the vigorous scholarship of the historian of Glasgow, Andrew MacGeorge,¹⁴ Churchmen focused on the years of negotiation with governments: for them Chalmers (but only under duress from his lieutenants), Buchanan and Candlish had consistently shunned possible compromises and attainable solutions with the state, making it impossible for any ministry (and not only Peels' and Graham's) to deal with them; moreover, as MacGeorge would argue powerfully, Alexander Dunlop, the lawyer who had framed the Claim of Right, and his fellow high-flyers had consistently made absurd demands on government which too often were based on a highly culpable misreading of Scottish history.¹⁵ In MacGeorge's view, the Disruption had been brought about by the self-indulgent, over-reaching extremism of the Evangelical leadership and had not been caused by any misconceptions in parliament about what was at issue. The essential thrust of this interpretation was that the young Turks, who had "captured" Chalmers and had forced

¹⁴ MacGeorge wrote under the pseudonym "Veritas", and was given to honing his arguments and style in furious exchanges of letters in the newspapers: a selection of his many pamphlets in the 1870s was collected and published under the title *Papers on the Principles and the real Position of the Free Church* (Glasgow, 1875, 1878).

¹⁵ This is perhaps MacGeorge's most impressive pamphlet: *The Statements in the Claim of Right ... are they true?* (Glasgow, 1875); see also *An Answer to Dr Buchanan's Speech ... in the Free Church Presbytery ... on the Principles and the Position of the Free Church* (Glasgow, 1874), 63, 85, 109.

through the Disruption,¹⁶ had betrayed the central Evangelical ideals of the 1830s – and, in so doing, had critically reduced the extent of the secession; by failing to carry with them so substantial a number of the “old” Evangelicals (whether formally members of the Middle Party or not), they had ensured that the Free Church was not the new *national* church of the country and had not delivered the mortal blow to the Establishment that they had hoped for.

The next step in this newly-vigorous, pro-Church attack was to highlight the post-Disruption problem of their antagonists, not so much concentrating on the continuing financial difficulties of the Free Church or on its disappointments over its membership (visible in the “statistical war” of the 1860s),¹⁷ but pinpointing these constitutional problems which had come to haunt it – in particular, arguing that the recent Cardross case had proved that the “winning” of spiritual independence in 1843 had been a chimera. In the course of that case it had been determined that the Free Church, as with all non-Established churches, was no more than a religious co-partnery, subject to the decisions of the civil courts which were obliged to oversee all aspects of their management that could be judged to carry civil consequences; and that was contrasted with the situation of the Church by Law Established, for which parliament had secured extensive areas of jurisdiction against any interference by those same civil courts. Pro-Establishment writers were more than ready to imply that Chalmers, for one, would have been greatly more at ease in the post-1874 national church than in the Free church of Candlish and Rainy. McGeorge, again, would provide a telling addendum, arguing that some of the judges who had been in the minority in the major patronage cases in and after 1838 (that is, had

¹⁶ This was no new interpretation: as early as 1846 the parish minister in Duddingston, James Macfarlane, in a largely forgotten but sharply-observed pamphlet, *The Late Secession* (Edinburgh, 1846), discussed the actions of the youthful “junto in Edinburgh” and their careful guardianship of Chalmers (“not to have it all his own way”) in the last stages of the conflict.

¹⁷ The increasing evidence of non-church-going only served to exacerbate relations between the Church and the Free Church: see D.J. Withrington, “The churches in Scotland c.1870 - c.1900: towards a new social conscience?”, *ante*, xix (1977), 155-6.

then supported the Non-Intrusionist claims) had subsequently made it plain that they believed they had been wrong to do so; even the support of liberal-minded lawyers seemed to be melting away.¹⁸

These battle lines, drawn up from significantly different readings of the inherited documentation of the Disruption era, were already well-settled when, after a short lull, hostilities broke out again with a vengeance in 1884-85. It then seemed that Gladstone's Liberal government would at last bring in the necessary legislation to disestablish the Church of Scotland, and so heralded a period which Churchmen would later refer to as "The Second Ten Years' Conflict".

The Establishment, as expected, set up Church-defence organisations throughout the country, and also founded new journals to provide additional support for its cause.¹⁹ But in the renewed crisis of the 1880s its post-Disruption leadership – of a Church seen to have recovered hope, numbers and resolution since the darker days of 1843 – went on the attack. For them, only a national and Established Church, responsible to the nation at large (not merely to its own congregations) and committed to the provision of religious ordinances to all classes in all communities in Scotland, could overcome the combined threats of secularism, socialism, indifference and infidelity. The Church was persuaded to launch itself into intense reappraisal, into a long programme of reconstruction both of ecclesiastical structures and of its social policies, and into taking up positive initiatives in discussions about the national provision for social welfare – in housing, health, in better leisure facilities, generally in improving standards of behaviour in the workplace and in the home.²⁰ And all this on the grounds that the Established Church, as the only true church of the nation, the Disruption notwithstanding, had inherited these responsibilities in conjunction with the civil magistrate. Once again the name of Thomas Chalmers was to the fore, not only as a spokesman for an acceptable social idealism but for his deeply-held conviction that

¹⁸ One such judge was Lord Ivory: see A. MacGeorge, *The Free Church Claims: their real character and tendency* (Glasgow, 1877).

¹⁹ The most prominent was *The Scottish Church*, dating from 1885.

²⁰ D.J. Withrington, "Non-church-going, church organisation and 'crisis' in the church c.1880 - c.1920", *ante*, xxiv (1991).

only an endowed, state-supported Church could cover the land with properly secured religious ordinances. This remarkable readiness on the part of the Church to “steal” the figure of Chalmers from its identification with the Free Church, was accompanied by a perceptible softening in attitude towards the *pre-Disruption* Evangelicals, with some public recognition being given to the sincerity in commitment and in conduct which had taken so many out of the Establishment, together with an acceptance that the Disruption had perforce achieved much for the “Christian good” of Scotland. In short, the Disruption idealism of its older supporters was to be separated from the new and incompatible policies of the “new” Free Church and its leaders. These leaders, it was declared, could no longer be regarded as the rightful heirs of the historical Disruption: it even appeared that they no longer even represented the views of their own membership, for otherwise why should such substantial numbers of Free Churchmen, and even some United Presbyterians, have joined the Layman’s League which had been founded in July 1890 to campaign against disestablishment and disendowment?²¹ Rainy, taunted for being at the head of a brutally-dictatorial junta in the Free Church Assemblies, was vigorously condemned for distancing himself from the men and the women in the Free Kirk pews just as he had so clearly already distanced himself from the principles of 1843. Again and again the nation was warned not to confuse the Free Church vision of the 1890s – in character, policies or ideals – with Chalmers’ vision of the Disruption church.²²

These exchanges were bound to reach a new crescendo in and around 1893, the jubilee year of the Disruption, when recollections of 1843 would be paramount in the celebrations. Yet even as the jubilee plans were being made, there were warnings from friendly quarters not to rush to sanctify the men and the actions of fifty years before. In May 1892 the Scottish ex-Free Kirk minister who was editor of the Nonconformist *British Weekly*, the militant voluntary William

²¹ C. Johnstone, *Handbook of Scottish Church Defence* (Edinburgh, 2nd edn., 1894), 133-5.

²² J. Rankin, “Chalmers – a criticism”, *Scots Magazine*, ix (1891-2), 364-70; A.C. Baildon, “The jubilee of the Free Church”, *ibid.*, xii (1893), 33-5.

Robertson Nicoll, savaged W.G. Blaikie's closing address as Moderator of the Free Church Assembly for the unfavourable comparisons he made between the contemporary Church and its effervescent and single-minded predecessor of 1843. For the next twelve months Nicole's editorials consistently condemned what he saw as the mindless reverence of Free Church spokesmen and writers for the particular events and heroes of that now distant time. No doubt disconcertingly for many of his Scottish readers, Nicoll repeatedly wrote that Chalmers had been badly mistaken in believing that Non-Intrusion policies and Establishment could ever be made compatible, and contended that he had handed down to the Free Church a delusive ideal which had come to haunt it (and open to the taunts of Churchmen). For Nicoll the Free Church would be wholly wrong to tie itself to the outmoded, indeed impossible ideas of a distant age;²³ rather, it should be asking itself how the much admired giants of 1843 might have wished to deal with the problems and the challenges of 1893.

Inevitably, Nicoll's warnings were quickly submerged in the waves of euphoric commemoration of past heroes and past heroic deeds, in countless anniversary sermons and self-congratulatory addresses. Throughout, the message was bellowed out, that the Free Church alone was the rightful heir of Knox and Melville and the Covenanters, carrying forward the struggle against an interfering state. In one official history, indeed, Free Church traditions were traced back into the shady era of the Celtic Church;²⁴ by this account, again, the Disruption was an especially significant step in the thousand-year battle in Scotland to recover the "true religion" – hence, the Free Church was not schismatic, as its opponents asserted, but could rightfully proclaim itself the church of the historic nation and peoples of Scotland.

The Church of Scotland, meanwhile, was facing its severest crisis yet, as the Gladstonian Liberals made it plain that they intended to

²³ *British Weekly*, 26 May 1892; 13 April, 25 May, 1 June, 10 August 1893.

²⁴ G.B. Ryley, J.M. McCandlish, *Scotland's Free Church: a historical retrospect and memorial of the Disruption* (London, 1893), 1-27.

disendow and disestablish it at the first opportunity.²⁵ In the *Handbook of Scottish Church Defence* in 1893-94, Christopher Johnstone (later, the judge Lord Sands) continued the policy of demonstrating that Rainy was leading a church which had broken faith with what was honourable in its past and in its disestablishment policies had also broken faith with its own membership. In constructing his tale of the Disruption, Johnstone began unerringly from the premise that its prime cause had indeed been patronage, and that the greatest number of the people who had gone out with their ministers in 1843 had done so in the name of Non-Intrusion. If the Veto Act had been rescinded in 1839-40, as Chalmers himself had wanted, and the way had been made clear for government to adopt some agreed solution to the problem of patronage, then the “acute stage of the controversy” could have been avoided. The act of Disruption had been an avoidable mistake, a development manufactured for their own ends by those younger High-Flyers who, in adopting the concept of an unrestricted spiritual independence, had promoted a domineering clericalism which had worked against the best interests of Free Church laymen and women and had overturned the finer traditions of Scottish presbyterianism.²⁶

With Gladstone’s defeat in 1895, the war of words subsided: and a hugely relieved Church of Scotland concentrated on its plans for its internal reconstruction, while the Free and United Presbyterian Churches set themselves to negotiate the union which would take place in 1900. But when that union came into being, it at once raised, in a very uncomfortable way for the United Free Church, the vexed question of Church-State relations – and with that, once again, the issue of the “Disruption principles”. The confrontation narrowly avoided in 1873 this time did occur – a Begg-style secession by disgruntled (mainly Highland) Free Churchmen who, resisting union with the UPs because it wholly contradicted the founding guidelines announced by Chalmers in the first Free Church Assembly, went to the civil courts for redress. They were successful and, declared to be the

²⁵ The proposal to legislate was, this time, in the Queen’s Speech, but it would founder in the furore over Irish Home Rule and in the government’s defeat in 1895.

²⁶ Johnstone, *Handbook*, 69-80.

only true inheritors of the Disruption Church, they were granted its whole property and assets. The Rainy-led majority then found themselves, paradoxically, utterly dependent on parliament to find some basis of settlement by which they could regain a due proportion of churches, manses and financial assets. Yet, even with that background to their writings, ex-Free Church apologists of the early years of this century softened but little in their public attitudes to the state.

In a series of newspaper articles in 1905, just as the crisis was being resolved, Hector Macpherson addressed a popular audience on “the great principles contended for at the Disruption”, and from them produced a book carefully entitled *Scotland's Battles for Spiritual Independence*.²⁷ Here we find an old argument, that the Disruption was a conclusive moment in a long struggle, dating from the Reformation, but this time on behalf of popular rights and democratic principles. Macpherson held that the Evangelicals had been wrong to compromise over patronage in the 1830s since, even where it had worked, the Veto Act had only served to delay the removal of aristocratic and landed influence. He berated Chalmers for not having declared for spiritual independence in 1833, yet at the same time fought to exonerate him from the damaging accusation that he had always wished to retain the state connection:²⁸

Those who contend that Chalmers looked upon the Establishment principle as the fundamental basis of the Church are drawn to credit him with the absurd idea that the Church should have as its fundamental basis a principle which, at the time of the Disruption, had become a moral nuisance.

In place this comment was not enough to convince his readers – and in an attempt to have it both ways – Macpherson added that in any case, in the first Free Church Assembly, there had been many “who did not agree with Dr Chalmers in his defence of the Establishment principle”. Having denied that patronage had been the real cause of the Disruption since that would have made it “a mere squabble over the election of

²⁷ Macpherson was an Edinburgh journalist, and committed Liberal: the articles appeared first in the *Edinburgh Evening News*.

²⁸ Macpherson, *Scotland's Battles*, 213, 229.

ministers, a second-rate dispute over a second-rate question", he declared that in 1843 the nation, instead, had heard a deeply patriotic cry for religious liberty which was spelled out in the "real Disruption principles". An English-dominated British parliament had been unable to come to terms with this popular demand in Scotland for "a living partnership with the democratic spirit"; the question of spiritual independence – which was, after all, still so much at issue in 1905 – was "simply our old friend the Rights of Man in a new dress"; and the Disruption had sparked into life in Scotland a struggle for the sovereignty of conscience over the sovereignty of the constitution.²⁹ The "real" Disruption, therefore, for Macpherson, was an extraordinary amalgam of ecclesiastical independency, Scottish nationalism, and political radicalism. Here, very remarkably, if without the seminal comparisons which Harold Laski was to make with the Oxford Movement in England, Macpherson was foreshadowing Laski's renowned interpretation of the Disruption as the advance signal in Britain of the new political theory of co-ordinate jurisdictions in the modern state and as an attack on the constitutional absolutism of parliamentary sovereignty.³⁰

Yet the same year, 1905, in which Macpherson's book appeared, saw the publication of a very different view of Disruption times, in the recollections of an old man who had been there rather than the mischievous reconstruction of a post-Rainy Free Kirker.³¹ Professor Alexander Campbell Fraser had been a young student at Edinburgh University in the late 1830s, had thrown in his lot with the new church in 1843, had taught in New College before succeeding William Hamilton in the chair of Logic at Edinburgh University, and had been a very effective editor of the *North British Review*.³² In his old age, reminiscing in his autobiography about the making of the Disruption, he took a quite different stance from Macpherson, and especially from

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 225, 282-3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

³¹ A.C. Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica: a retrospect* (Edinburgh, 1905).

³² J. Shuttock, "Problems of parentage: the *North British Review* and the Free Church of Scotland" in *The Victorian Periodical Press: samplings and soundings*, edd. J. Shuttock, M. Wolff (Leicester, 1982), 156-83.

his abrupt dismissal of contemporary governments as ignorant or anglicised. Perhaps surprisingly, Fraser declared great sympathy for the ministries of the time which, he had no doubt, had wished to preside over “a perfectly tolerant state ... equally friendly to all religions”, only to find Chalmers and the Evangelicals in the 1830s violently demanding exclusive state support for one sect only, the state-endowed Church: it seemed cruelly wrong to condemn only the political leaders of the day, Whig or Conservative, for having forced the Disruption, just as it was incorrect to portray them as perverse or heedless, or even inconsiderate and offhand, in their dealings with the Church leaders, who themselves too often pressed their arguments to absurd lengths. For this “Disruption man” the world had moved on: sixty years later, Campbell Fraser observed, it was “strange, even pathetic, now to revive the memory of those echoes of stormy controversy in a past generation”.³³

Rainy’s biographer, in 1909, was in no such mind to shrug off or to dismiss the living heritage of the Disruption.³⁴ Dedicated, like his subject and young devotees such as Macpherson, to a policy of disestablishment, Patrick Carnegie Simpson was at great pains to contend that the 1843 secession was directly caused by statesmen who went out of their way to rebuff all reasonable approaches in the previous ten years, just as their successors attacked religious liberty in 1874 by abolishing patronage in the state Church. There is bitter flavour, too, in all his comments on the Establishment: even at the moment when moves were begun to reunite the Church of Scotland with the United Free Church, he keenly demanded of government that it ensured that the Church at last paid “her part of the price for the unity and religious liberty” of the Scottish churches “by yielding up its endowments” – in effect, a final indictment of whatever still remained of any Chalmersian inheritance in the new United Free Church.³⁵

But a new phenomenon arose in the same period in which Macpherson and Carnegie Simpson were writing: general histories

³³ Fraser, *Biographia*, 114.

³⁴ P.C. Simpson, *Life of Principal Rainy*, 2 vols. (London, 1909).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, ii, 160 – an aside by Carnegie Simpson in a passage relating to the disestablishment campaign of the 1880s and 1890s.

written by a new breed of academic and professional historians of Scotland. Peter Hume Brown's three-volume *History of Scotland* was published in 1909 and, in a final section disarmingly entitled "the age of secular interests", he included a chapter on the Disruption in which Whiggish history ran riot. The Disruption was "an inevitable end" to the church-state controversies left unresolved at the Reformation; the "conditions of the time" had allowed the Evangelicals to challenge the fact and working of patronage; such was the in-built antagonism of Moderates and Evangelicals, "it was necessary and desirable that they should part company"; and it had all been for an ultimate good – "the Disruption was a disaster to the National Church, but it can hardly be regarded as a disaster to national religion". Comfortable generalities eased Hume Brown away from the need to confront those difficult questions about the actual *making* of the Disruption which previously had rightly occupied so many partisan writers.³⁶

In 1917, however, that issue was to be confronted directly by William Law Mathieson, when he reached the years 1797-1843 in his multi-volume studies of Scottish history since the Reformation.³⁷ It is clear at once that this author was deeply versed in the sources of 1833-43 and also in the wide range of contentious commentaries on the Disruption which had since made their way into print. Thus, in a careful and frequently astute account of the Ten Years' Conflict and its outcome, he distinctly played down Chalmers' personal role in its later stages, making much of the contrasts between his attitudes to the secession and those of his "younger, pugnacious assistants"; knowingly or not, he adopted Campbell Fraser's view that the Non-Intrusion policy and the persistent demands for state funding for Church extension were "in their very nature inconsistent". In effect, Law Mathieson threw considerable doubts on the validity, consistency and logic of the policies of the High Evangelicals and even of the act of secession itself.³⁸ Needless to say, he roused non-Establishment reviewers to furious retort. For instance, in the *Scottish Historical*

³⁶ P. Hume Brown, *History of Scotland* (Cambridge, 1909), iii, 431-2.

³⁷ W.L. Mathieson, *Church and Reform in Scotland, 1797-1843* (Glasgow, 1917).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 281, 370.

Review, it was insisted, from hallowed tradition, that “Chalmers’ influence upon the Disruption must have been great” and the reviewer was outraged by the suggestion that the sacrifices of 1843 might have been overplayed by Free Church propagandists. Most upsetting of all, and not only to sensitive Free Churchmen, was the author’s general conclusion – that, just as the ending of the old Scottish franchises in 1832 and the incorporation of Scotland into a new British constitutional structure had brought to a close a distinctively Scottish political history, so too the Disruption had signalled the end of a distinctively national religious history of Scotland.³⁹ The argument here was that, since the Old Church no longer commanded the allegiance of the vast majority of the people of Scotland, it was no longer properly national, and it would therefore have no more importance in Scottish constitutional affairs than had the Anglican churches in Ireland or Wales – this argument implying also that the Free Church had even less claim to be a national institution in that sense, but was only another religious sect.⁴⁰ A United Free Church minister, reviewing the book in the *English Historical Review* could hardly contain himself:⁴¹ ignoring or misunderstanding the author’s wider constitutional argument, he hotly asserted that the Disruption had revitalised Scottish religious life, and then cast doubt on the quality of Law Mathieson’s scholarship: he had found the narrative of the 1830s “obscure and confused” and condemned the author for introducing “worthless matter ... trivial and gossiping details” (e.g. Chalmers’ relations with his fellow Evangelicals) into what was supposed to be “grave history” – thus “detracting from its value, and taxing the reader’s patience”. The author, he concluded, had “an inveterate prejudice” against the Church Evangelicals and thus against the Free Church. In fact, what this reviewer complained most about, was the shrewdly documented flow of its coherent and developing analysis, something which kept Law Mathieson’s account well to the fore until very recently in academic booklists on modern Scottish history.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 373; *Scottish Historical Review*, xiv (1917), 280-1.

⁴⁰ Mathieson, *Church and Reform*, 372-3.

⁴¹ *English Historical Review*, xxxii (1917), 301-2.

With the long-awaited reunion of the Established and United Free Churches more or less assured from 1925-6, churchmen-historians were again tempted to enter the fray. J.R. Fleming, a former United Presbyterian minister who had retired from the United Free Church in 1919, noted in his preface to his new history in 1927 that, while it had been the case that “to be one-sided was almost a qualification for getting a hearing”, he hoped that it might now be possible to look at what had happened in the era of the Disruption “in a broad historic light”.⁴² And A.J. Campbell, an Established minister in Glasgow, while readily agreeing in his preface that any account of the Disruption was “still instinct with fire”, hoped that “we have now reached a point at which it is no longer possible to believe that one side was more in the right than the other”.⁴³

For his part, Fleming’s “due sense of fairness and proportion” led him to conclude that the Evangelical leaders in the 1830s and 1840s had demonstrated “a kind of Presbyterian papalism”, excusable perhaps because they were themselves “the victims of circumstances”. But when it came to apportioning blame for the Disruption, Fleming’s own predilections held full sway: this lay clearly at the door of a parliament which was in the hands of English MPs “who could not grasp the meaning and circumstances of a peculiarly Scottish problem” and, keenly adopting the Macpherson/Laski interpretation of the Disruption as, essentially, a constitutional problem of conflicting jurisdictions, resolved that “the conditions for such an experiment were scarcely possible in 1843”. While Fleming was ready to admit – perhaps remarkable in someone of his background – that the Disruption might have been avoided, nonetheless, as the culmination of honourable actions, it still deserved much to be honoured. Today, Fleming’s account seems altogether too cautious, even perhaps too tidily deterministic, certainly too keen to exonerate as well as to explain; and it is surprising, given the evidence available to him, to find him asserting that the Disruption fathers (? all of them) sought a “middle

⁴² J.R. Fleming, *A History of the Church in Scotland, 1843-74* (Edinburgh, 1927), 19.

⁴³ A.J. Campbell, *Two Centuries of the Church of Scotland, 1707-1929* (Paisley, 1930), 5-6.

ground” in the conflict with courts and governments, and that “the Church” (undefined) had at the Disruption merely vindicated its “right” (undefined) as a religious society “to live and act as an independent body”.⁴⁴

Campbell’s book is quite different – in effect it is an intensive study of the eighteenth-century Church, with an epilogue on the years 1843-1929. Throughout, there is an assumption that, if Scotland had retained its powers of legislation after 1707, then there would not have ensued two centuries of secession and halting reunion within Scottish presbyterianism. Fleming’s emphasis on church and state is replaced by a concentration on conflicts *within* presbyterianism and among the various parties within the national Church. The Disruption comes to be interpreted not as some generalised response to outside circumstances but as the direct and often deliberate contrivance of culpable men (within and outside the Church) resting on “differences in temperament as well as in policy”. It is plain that Campbell had been strongly influenced by a recently published, well-documented study of Disruption times, which was intended to retrieve the reputations of the Middle Party leaders who had been so fiercely reviled by Free Church writers.⁴⁵ Thus Campbell insisted that these Middle Party Evangelicals, together with many of the old Moderates, had “with equal sincerity” held to the principle of spiritual independence, but not as it had come to be expressed in “the extravagant language or impossible demands of Dunlop’s Claim of Right”: that document was in any case based on an interpretation of Scottish church history by the Evangelical leadership in 1842 “accepted by no-one but themselves”. Campbell argued that, by acting so intemperately in the closing stages of the conflict, the ultras had fatally lost the support even of a large body within their own party; that they had so signally failed to carry the Church at large with them in 1843 was a consequence of their own making, and was largely due to that “spiritual pride and exclusiveness” – eternally exemplified in the incessant intrigues of Robert Candlish – which in its turn ensured that “the Non-Intrusion controversy ended in a split in the

⁴⁴ Fleming, *History*, 23-31.

⁴⁵ Campbell, *Two Centuries*, 259n.

Church". Campbell concluded that the Disruption "as a gesture was magnificent, but it was not an achievement": the secessionists had not dealt their intended mortal blow to the national church, had foolishly split their own support, and had converted even sympathetic politicians (of all parties) into saddened and often embittered opponents.⁴⁶

Not until 1943, the centenary of the Disruption, were another pair of church historians tempted to venture their analyses. Principal Hugh Watt of New College, Edinburgh, published a set of lectures on *Thomas Chalmers and the Disruption* while Professor G.D. Henderson of Aberdeen University, at the invitation of the General Assembly, offered *Heritage: a study of the Disruption*. Hugh Watt, painstakingly detached and knowingly cautious, produced a generous panegyric of Chalmers which, resting very firmly on Hanna's biography, advanced historical understanding but little.⁴⁷ It is strange to find him concluding that Chalmers consistently acted "in no spirit of challenge to the state", as we recall his furious attacks on governments over church extension or university reform; it is stranger still to read that in 1843 "the true church of Scotland had severed itself from the state" without due attempt to define his terms. Throughout there is an awkward straining not to commit himself to observations that might open up old (mainly United Free Church) wounds – as if inhibited in this by the very fact of 1929. But there was a reassuring message for war-torn Scotland: the Disruption had not only been a necessary means of revitalising religion in Scotland, it had also been an early rebuttal to domineering governments and to a secular state-machine, and a point of defence against the excesses of totalitarianism.⁴⁸

G.D. Henderson had received a quite specific brief from the General Assembly, to produce "a commemoration of the Disruption

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 243, 248-9, 262-4, 272-3.

⁴⁷ The foreword to Watt's book notes that the library at New College had been "lately enriched by a very large Chalmers MS. collection" but then, rather surprisingly, concluded that this contained "few gleanings for later students ... at least on the central issues" and that Hanna's official biography might be said to contain all but the last word on Chalmers and his times.

⁴⁸ Watt, *Chalmers*, 343-57.

and thanksgiving for the union of 1929",⁴⁹ and he responded brilliantly with what is still undoubtedly the best short history of the church in Scotland. He followed his instructions closely: he did not "celebrate" the Disruption, but set himself the historian's task of judging it as a particular testing-point in five centuries of Scottish ecclesiastical development, against the background of a century of heated interpretations of the long-term history of the church-state relationship in Scotland and internal church disputes, in which the Disruption had been both a crisis point and, in time, an agent of purifying resolution. Henderson too looked for some significance for his own day in so cataclysmic an event: and reckoned the Disruption to have been "an incident in the search after Liberty", deserving its own honoured place in the search for "the true relationship of the individual and the community, of Liberty and Law".⁵⁰

Characteristically, Henderson had steeped himself in the documentation of Disruption times and he never lost sight of the fact that his task was to bring to light those historical factors which, in fact rather than in folk memory, had led to the events and the consequences of 1843. The result is a magnificent overview, and for its time a remarkably fresh vision, of Scottish church history with the Disruption as its centrepiece.⁵¹ Setting his analysis firmly in a wide socio-political context, he made little attempt to soften his conclusions merely to accommodate unwarranted sectarian sensitivities which had, in his view, survived too long and were too often based on historical misjudgement and misunderstanding. Thus, in commenting on the Ten Years' Conflict, Henderson is at pains to stress that there had been much reacting to events, and altogether much less coherence either in policy or in action than had generally been reported, and also much less unchangeability in principle and conduct than had been usually credited to the main actors in the drama. Not only had Chalmers "altered his

⁴⁹ See the foreword by the convener of the Assembly's Centenary Committee in Henderson, *Heritage*, 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵¹ In a book of 158 pages, the first thirty-nine mainly review the pre-1820s "tradition" in the church(es) and the closing twenty analyse the developments since 1900.

position repeatedly, even Candlish had changed his mind". Investigating the crucial elements in the Ten Years' Conflict, he – like Campbell Fraser – gave full weight to the effects on politicians from bombardment of claims and counter-assertions from the varying groups of church leaders, and he saw their reactions as crucial – but not at all as judged by Buchanan or Macpherson or (as it happened) by Hugh Watt. For Henderson, Westminster politicians had – in the aftermath of the Chartist troubles of 1838 and later – been deeply suspicious of any "democratic tendencies", and were particularly upset when these were blatantly paraded by men who represented a national, state-supported institution such as the Church of Scotland; also, and Henderson clearly saw this as having special significance, they were understandably anxious that the uninhibited claims for spiritual independence, voiced alike at the time by English and Scots Evangelicals, would lead to an objectionable clerical tyranny, "without the useful check of public opinion which the state ought to provide", at least in its own national and Established churches; furthermore on this particular point, there was at Westminster a recognisable hesitation to accept that "the voice of a party that happened to be dominant" in the Assemblies of the Church of Scotland (but was weakening in 1841-2) should be confused with "the voice of the Church" in the nation at large. What Henderson was underlining here was the need for church historians to apply a wider, less inward and less kirk-dominated judgement of politicians and their motivations in the era of the Disruption. This may have stemmed in part from his own Establishment background, but clearly also arose from his researches; he was, at any rate, even more critical of the Church Evangelicals than A.J. Campbell had been: their deputations to government had too often been grossly inept, naive and frequently ill-informed, in their negotiations with successive ministries; they had crucially underestimated the general impact of their deposition of the "Strathbogie Seven" in 1841 – this not only broke the comparative solidarity of the Non-Intrusionists in the Church and forced the Middle Party into being, but just as importantly it had shifted the great weight of public opinion away from the dominant group; again, the threat in 1842 to depose all recalcitrant Moderate ministers and replace them with Assembly appointees had shocked even the high-flyers' most

devoted *political* supporters into doubt and confusion at an absolutely critical moment in the political bargaining that was in process; and they failed to understand that by the time the Claim of Right was sent to Westminster it was too easy for antagonists to portray it as merely a party manifesto of an arrogant and increasingly unrepresentative group in the Church, not even by mid-1842 including a majority of parish ministers.⁵²

In 1960 the fresh look that was given to Reformation studies, on the occasion of the quatercentenary of that crucial episode in Scottish church history, was not paralleled in writings on the Disruption, which might have built on Henderson's astute insights. There was little sign of revisionist thinking in Principal Burleigh's general church history in which, briefly but with great care, he provided a restrained and very even-handed account of the Ten Tears' Conflict and its outcome – rather less generous towards the Free Church, however, than he had been in 1943 in a long editorial in the *Evangelical Quarterly*.⁵³ Like Dr George Pryde, Burleigh regretted the Disruption, as an avoidable calamity caused as much by the intransigence of the main actors as by the nature or the force of their arguments, while admitting its high value as a means of enlivening and energising presbyterianism in later 19th-century Scotland. Meanwhile, Dr Stewart Mechie was dealing with the issues raised by the Disruption, as they affected important developments in Scottish social welfare in the period 1780-1870, in a truly novel way: he ignored them, hardly mentioning the fact or impact of the Disruption at all, to the evident bewilderment and exasperation of his reviewers and readers.⁵⁴

But the new social history that was coming strongly into vogue was catching up with ecclesiastical and religious history, and with a vengeance. The Disruption, *pace* Dr Mechie, was plainly recognised as a catalyst of wide-ranging social and political change in Scotland: "the

⁵² *Ibid.*, 79-80, 84-5, 86, 89, 96.

⁵³ J.H.S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (London, 1960); and *Evangelical Quarterly*, xv (1943), 184-7.

⁵⁴ S. Mechie, *The Church and Scottish Social Development, 1780-1870* (London, 1960). See the review by W. Ferguson in *Scottish Historical Review*, xli (1962), 56-8, and by A.I. Dunlop in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 13 (1960), 429.

most momentous single event of the nineteenth century", wrote Dr William Ferguson in his volume in the Edinburgh history of Scotland in 1968.⁵⁵ A year earlier, in the *Scottish Historical Review*, Dr Allan MacLaren delivered his first weighty warning of a novel, strongly Marxist interpretation of developments in the mid-nineteenth century church.⁵⁶ This arrived, bringing something of the shock of an earthquake, in 1974 with the publication of *Religion and Social Class: the Disruption Years in Aberdeen*. MacLaren was not concerned at all with the theological background to the controversy, and but little with the machinations of the grand figures in the church-state confrontation; he examined the Disruption as a prime agency for prompting and accelerating social-class stratification in one local community, for its part in developing attitudes and practices in kirk sessions in deterring working-class attendance and in weakening church-attachment among the lower orders while strengthening it in the bourgeoisie, and for its role in sharpening social tensions in within-church relationships and in inter-denominational rivalries. This exhaustively-researched study raised acute questions, about the differing social and economic character of congregational identities, about the obvious and the less easily discerned social advantages of congregational membership or adherence, and about the value of church-going and of service in the eldership to secular advancement. If there has been some mild questioning of the validity of all MacLaren's arguments for other Scottish cities and for rural rather than urban areas,⁵⁷ this has not lessened their influence on later researches. His work has certainly had its part to play in the new concentration on the nineteenth century in studies in Scottish church history – shown, in the papers published in

⁵⁵ W. Ferguson, *Scotland, 1688 to the present* (Edinburgh, 1968), 313.

⁵⁶ A.A. MacLaren, "Presbyterianism and the working class in a mid-nineteenth century city", *Scottish Historical Review*, xlv (1967), 115-39.

⁵⁷ G.B. Robertson, "Spiritual Awakening in the North-East of Scotland, and the Disruption of 1843" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Aberdeen); P.L.M. Hillis, "Presbyterianism and social class in mid-19th century Glasgow: a study of nine churches", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 32 (1990), no.1 and "The sociology of the Disruption" in *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, edd. S.J. Brown, M. Fry (Edinburgh, 1993), 44-62.

this journal alone, by the fact that, whereas in 1956-74 some twenty per cent were on nineteenth-century topics, between 1975 and 1992 that proportion had risen to forty per cent, the great bulk of these contributions being on matters related directly or indirectly to the Disruption.

Revisionism, even without a Marxist flavour, was in the air in the 1970s. A beginning had been made already, in exploring the phenomenon of non-church-going and in a critical review of Free Church activities in school provision; more central to an understanding of the Disruption as a historical event was a splendidly-researched essay by Dr G.I.T. Machin published in 1972 – on church-state relations in Scotland in the 1830s and 1840s – revealing, and revelling in, the complexities of the political background to the Westminster-Non-Intrusionist negotiations.⁵⁸ Dr Machin, happily (in Bruce Lenman's memorable phrase) not constrained by a need to "display ancestral loyalties"⁵⁹ over the Disruption, treated it as an episode in the *British* parliamentary and ecclesiastical politics in which he was so expert. His conclusion in important respects support the earlier interpretations by A.J. Campbell and G.D. Henderson: thus, "it would be incorrect to say that government refused non-intrusionist demands because Scotland was only a minority voice in parliament, because she was remote from Westminster or because her clerical quarrels were uninteresting, unintelligible or distasteful to many English politicians". Machin's argument as it developed was consistently arresting and enlightening: in 1839-40 and later, he contended, the Non-Intrusionists' case "did not come through strongly enough to challenge the government's view ... in parliamentary elections and popular organisation [their] voice was muffled and inconclusive": here, carefully drawn out of parliamentary and ministerial papers as well as from church sources, was a thoroughly distinctive and convincing analysis, and a clear counter to traditional Free Church views which rested on more narrowly-based and inward-looking records. Dr

⁵⁸ G.I.T. Machin, "The Disruption and British Politics, 1834-43", *Scottish Historical Review*, li (1972), 20.

⁵⁹ In a review of MacLaren's *Religion and Social Class*, in *ibid.*, lvi (1977), 107.

Machin's judgement of the relative weakness of the Evangelicals' challenge to the politicians did not halt there: Peel's government in 1842-43 was "not sufficiently impressed by the power of non-intrusion ... otherwise the veto might have been conceded in spite of the Moderates, [who] might have accepted even an unpalatable government settlement".⁶⁰ Taken in conjunction with Henderson's suggestion that, because of their treatment of the "Strathbogie Seven", the High-Flyers in 1840-42 lost much public sympathy and support and also drove so many "old" Evangelicals into the ranks of the Middle Party, does this not raise at once the question whether it was the Evangelical leadership's own unrestrained actions *in Scotland* which ultimately denied them the chance of a settlement with government on something like their own terms? Machin's valuable wider view of the period has him point out that the Non-Intrusionists' pressure on Westminster paled badly beside the Irish bombardment of politicians there in the same crucial years: the Irish "in their threat to the Union had a political and constitutional dimension which the Scottish non-intrusionists never had".⁶¹

Older and earlier Free Church interpretations were under fire elsewhere too. In a still-unpublished Aberdeen thesis, George B. Robertson discovered little of substance, if anything at all, to support the often-presumed contrasts between Evangelicals and Moderates in the parishes of north-east Scotland – in theology, in the content and styles of their preaching, in church management or discipline.⁶² And in his study of Henry Cockburn, Karl Miller concluded that his well-known sympathy for the Disruption and those who broke the ties with the church of their fathers was essentially emotional, rather than reasoned and intellectual; and that, in his later career, he came to accept that the majority decisions in the main church cases of the 1830s

⁶⁰ Machin, "Disruption", *ibid.*, li (1972), 21-2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 51: see also Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832-1868* (Oxford, 1977), 158-60.

⁶² Robertson, "Spiritual Awakening", 88, 270, 336, 361-2.

and 1840s had been legally correct.⁶³ Again, Iain Maciver's careful studies of the eldership before 1843, and his questioning of the logicity or the acumen of decisions made and actions taken by the Evangelical leadership in the run-in to the Disruption, nibbled away effectively at older and well-worn views;⁶⁴ while Dr Stewart J. Brown demonstrated that Chalmers' efforts in his last years to construct a wholesome Christianised community in the West Port of Edinburgh, imaginative as it was and suffused as it was by Chalmers' personal commitment and his unbounded idealistic fervour, were not a success and were by no means aided by the fact and consequences of the Disruption.⁶⁵ Another traditionally-recognised success story of the Free Kirk was to come under scrutiny when Dr James Hunter sought out the religious factors in the "making of the crofting community", and would challenge older views: his researches indicated that the widespread popular support for the Free Church was the product of long-standing religious dissent in the Highlands and Islands rather than the persuasiveness of Non-Intrusion and that the wholesale attachment to the Disruption was due to "deep-seated social antagonism" (e.g. to landlords who were identified in 1843 with the Established Church) and was only "ostensibly religious".⁶⁶

In 1973 and 1975 there appeared the first two volumes, for 1688-1843 and 1843-1874, of a new general history of the Scottish church

⁶³ K. Miller, *Cockburn's Millenium* (London, 1975), 257-63; see also I. MacIver, "Cockburn and the Church" in *Lord Cockburn: a bicentenary commemoration, 1779-1979*, ed. A. Bell (Edinburgh, 1979), 68-103.

⁶⁴ I. Maciver, "The Evangelical Party and the eldership in the General Assemblies, 1820-1843", *ante*, xx (1978), 1-13; and "Chalmers as a 'manager' of the church", in *The Practical and the Pious*, ed. A.C. Cheyne (Edinburgh, 1985), 84-97.

⁶⁵ S. J. Brown, "The Disruption and urban poverty: Thomas Chalmers and the West Port operation in Edinburgh, 1844-47", *ante*, xx (1978), 65-89.

⁶⁶ J. Hunter, "The emergence of the crofting community: the religious contribution, 1798-1843", *Scottish Studies*, 18 (1974), 95-116; and *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976).

by Andrew Drummond and James Bulloch.⁶⁷ The trilogy – a final volume for 1874-1900 appeared in 1978 – was described by one reviewer as “a determined attempt to dislodge the Free Church interpretation of Scottish Church history”;⁶⁸ yet, interestingly, the treatment of the Disruption era seems generally temperate, and even generous and gracious towards the underlying motivations of the great majority of the Evangelical clergy. There were harsh words, some very harsh words indeed, but these were mostly reserved for individual leaders – notably Cunningham and Candlish, and above all for Rainy who, in and after the 1850s, was held to have stamped on the Free Church his own mighty arrogance and intolerance. Another reviewer, encapsulating the Drummond-Bulloch judgement of the Disruption, wrote that it came over as a tragedy, “the culmination of an unnecessary struggle between men who took up prepared positions in parties to which they would remain loyal, believing that they alone understood the whole Gospel”.⁶⁹ This welcome whiff of a theological element in the Disruption was a reminder, if only a faint reminder, that issues of faith as well as those of social status and political jockeying and administrative manoeuvring were then at stake.

In the past decade or so, scholarly activity in Disruption studies has certainly not waned. In 1980 Professor Frank Lyall offered something very distinctive, a lawyer’s account and analysis of church-state relations in Scotland – and *Of Presbyters and Kings* was, again, none too comfortable for those brought up on older Free Church-orientated histories. For Lyall, Scotland had never suffered nor been threatened by “thorough-going Erastianism”; the state in 1840-43 could not truthfully be accused of attempting to interfere directly in matters of doctrine; the civil courts had been correct in the years of the Conflict to uphold the “sovereign powers” vested in monarchy-in-parliament, not least in an era when governments had become committed to a policy of the fair or equal treatment of all sects in a religiously pluralistic society (and

⁶⁷ A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church, 1688-1843: the age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh, 1973) and *The Church in Victorian Scotland, 1843-1874* (Edinburgh, 1975), esp. 1-35.

⁶⁸ D.M. Thompson in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 31 (1980), 398.

⁶⁹ A.I. Dunlop, in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 28 (1975), 196.

Laski's view that the Evangelicals in the 1840s were stumbling towards a theory of coordinate jurisdictions was vitiated by unresolved questions left by his not offering precise definitions of the vital terms); the Veto was, indeed, a major innovation in 1834 but, even so, later problems over it in law were directly caused by the bad drafting of the act as it was passed by the Assembly of that year; and the courts' and the government's arguments in the Stewarton [Chapel Act] case were actually incontrovertible in law.⁷⁰ Early in the decade, too, Professor A.C. Cheyne in his admirable account of *The Transforming of the Kirk* provided a stimulating overview of the different strands of 'revolutionary' change which had so deeply affected the churches in Victorian Scotland – changing views of the Bible and of the Westminster Confession, and changes in liturgical ideas and practices, as well as the social revolution – in all of which the Disruption had a significant part to play, and in relation to which it had to be understood.⁷¹ The political results of the Disruption were then addressed, rather differently, by Dr Iain Hutchison and Michael Fry – the former exposing its importance in particular for party politics, in Scotland and in Britain as a whole; the latter concerned more immediately with its wider constitutional impact, arguing that it deeply weakened, if it did not end, the role of the national church as an accepted and protected symbol and agent of Scottish national identity.⁷²

The figure of Thomas Chalmers has recently come under more critical review than has been usual in this century, and his place in the Disruption story more carefully examined, in publications which take us well beyond the polite and comfortable platitudes of Hugh Watt in

⁷⁰ F. Lyall, *Of Presbyters and Kings: church and state in the law of Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1980), 7, 22, 27, 29, 44, 49, 148.

⁷¹ A.C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's religious revolution* (Edinburgh, 1983).

⁷² I.G.C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland, 1832-1924* (Edinburgh, 1986); M. Fry, *Patronage and Principle: a political history of modern Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1987), esp. 51-3.

1943. There has been a blockbuster of a modern biography,⁷³ allied to an exploration of the fate of that concept which Chalmers so devoted himself to, the notion of the “godly commonwealth” inherited from the Reformation and its hoped-for conjunction of a socially-aware church and the godly magistrate erecting together an ideal Christian community. Professor Stewart Brown writes revealingly about Chalmers as man and churchman, about his ideas and aspirations, as well as about him as a public figure formulating policies and captivating audiences – with his deficiencies and strange illogicalities brought to the fore. His conclusion, saddeningly, was that Chalmers’ life – by the very fact of the Disruption having taken place, in the inevitable break-up it caused in the national church, in the sundering of Establishment and the alliance between church and state – should be regarded as having ended in failure.⁷⁴ A conference held in 1980 to commemorate the bicentenary of Chalmers’ birth led to the publication of its proceedings in 1985, which maintained the vein of sympathetic but cogent criticism. Professor Cheyne’s powerful introduction to it confirmed that he too, “in the last analysis”, believed that Chalmers died in 1847 with his life’s work and ideals in tatters – the great “hinge” on which his ideals had depended, the concept of Establishment, had gone in 1843, so that the Disruption had been a “tragedy for Chalmers as well as for Scotland”.⁷⁵ Iain Maciver’s essay on Chalmers as “manager” of the church underpinned that view, the hinge this time being his much beloved Church Extension scheme – this had foundered in 1838-39, rejected by Melbourne as a proper object for government aid at the very moment when, in bad and worsening economic times, congregational and personal givings dried up, so that Chalmers “turned away from reliance on the social establishment towards his younger and more radical followers in the Assembly”, and he lost all control of the Evangelical cause as it entered its most sensitive and vital phase.⁷⁶ It is perhaps time, at last, to look anew at

⁷³ S.J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1982).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 348, 378.

⁷⁵ *The Practical and the Pious*, ed. Cheyne, 15, 28.

⁷⁶ I. Maciver, “Chalmers as ‘manager’ of the church”, 95.

other major figures of the period – to sift through their actions and intentions and aspirations, and improve our awareness of the realities of the debates and discussions and negotiations that led to the individual and group-decision taking which proved so vital as Disruption approached: Cunningham and Candlish and Buchanan assuredly, but also William Muir and Robert Story, and Duncan Mearns and George Cook, and Henry Duncan among others.

There has been some direct follow-up of the sociological approach so much identified in earlier years with Allan MacLaren. Dr Callum Brown has been especially active, producing a stream of articles and essays as well as his *Social History of Religion in Scotland since 1730*.⁷⁷ These are marked by an intense interest in the consequences of the Disruption but show little concern about the historical character of the making of that remarkable event. Yet that seems to be changing. A neat summary of Dr Brown's views is to be found in a newly-published pamphlet *The People in the Pews: religion and society in Scotland since 1780*.⁷⁸ Apropos the Disruption, he now suggests that it should be looked at in the wide context of the renowned "schismatic tendencies" of Scottish presbyterianism (a notion that would surely have appalled the seceding Evangelicals in 1843), and closely examined to discover if it might fit one of two theories offered by religious sociologists in accounting for the multiplication of churches – that this is the product of indifference to or alienation from existing churches, or is a signal of a growing popular enthusiasm for religion. Callum Brown sees the 1840s as a time when the growth of non-church-going was arrested and argues that throughout the rest of the century the new

⁷⁷ C.G. Brown, "The costs of pew-renting: church management, church-going and social class in nineteenth-century Glasgow", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 38 (1987); "Protest in the pews: interpreting presbyterianism and society in fracture during the Scottish economic revolution" in *Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society, 1700-1850*, ed. T.M. Devine (Edinburgh, 1990); "Religion, class and church growth" in *People and Society in Scotland, 1830-1914*, edd. W.H. Fraser, R.J. Morris (Edinburgh, 1990); "A revisionist approach to social change" in *Religion and Secularisation: historians and sociologists debate secularisation theory*, ed. S. Bruce (Oxford, 1992); etc.

⁷⁸ Published in 1993 by the Economic History Society of Scotland: *Studies in Scottish Economic and Social History*, no.3.

levels of attendance and adherence were maintained – and so aligns himself with a group of scholars who oppose the ‘usual’ concept of increasing secularisation being a continuing factor in later 19th-century history; where there was any decline, indeed, this was not due to overt secularisation (e.g. influenced by anti-church campaigning), so that the stability in Scottish attendances may stem from the stimulus which the Disruption applied to religion in the excitement of 1843. Dr Brown then proposes that James Hunter’s assertion about the Disruption in the Highlands should be extended to the Scottish Lowlands – “In the Highlands the Disruption was not an ecclesiastical dispute. It was class conflict.”⁷⁹ In Brown’s analysis:⁸⁰

Joining a dissenting church was a dynamic move for those experiencing other economic and social dynamics – whether they were the dispossessed or (most often) the aspiring. Theology and doctrine counted for little in this. Within Scottish presbyterianism, dissent took place within a common doctrinal framework and confessional standards. In short, social and economic change was the begetter of ecclesiastical schism. It was those who believed in the social value of the new economically-liberal society, but who felt the landowning classes’ authoritarian grip on the Established Church was a denial of “democracy”, who sought self-determination and justice in a dissenting meeting house.

If this sharply-expressed hypothesis (and many others in the pamphlet) do not have the same effect as MacLaren’s writings in the 1970s, and provoke a host of retaliatory researches, it will be very disappointing. There is already a small band of sceptics, indeed. Dr Hillis claims that his (restricted) local studies of parts of the Highlands demonstrate that landlord policies were only one factor accounting for the strength of the Free Church there – “and in many areas of the Highlands both Free and Established Churches were popular”;⁸¹ Dr Douglas Ansdell, also, in a

⁷⁹ Hunter, *Crofting Community*, 104; Brown, *People in the Pews*, 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸¹ P.L.M. Hillis, “The sociology of the Disruption”, 58.

valuable article on the Disruption in Lewis, concludes that “an interpretation of class conflict, as outlined by Hunter and his supporters, is not easy to sustain where Lewis is concerned”. For Ansdell, crofters and cottars were ready to attach themselves to the Free Church as a result, not of anti-landlordism but of their long-standing evangelical theological leanings – “because of the nature of Lewis Christianity in the 1830s and 1840s ... not the result of the Ten Years’ Conflict”.⁸² More than that, Hillis and others have argued that “in Lowland rural Scotland, social factors were less important than the personality of ministers and attitudes towards patronage”. We must wait to see how and when these skirmishes turn into a pitched battle.

Callum Brown takes issue with what he sees as other facile assumptions about the state of Scottish religion before the 1830s – and rightly so: for instance, ill-informed claims about the sectarian domination of the Church of Scotland before the Disruption and about the agreed strength of its “national” character, giving it enormous weight in securing Scottish identity.⁸³ Such an assumption has led Drummond and Bulloch to say that “with the coming of the Disruption in 1843 the old pattern of Scottish life was broken” and even that “before the Disruption Scotland had a national history; afterwards she had not”.⁸⁴ As we have seen, this kind of comment has had a long history, at least as far back as 1919 and William Law Mathieson; and has drawn in many today who have a public concern to “reconstitute” Scottish identity, and wish to use or to blame history in their efforts.⁸⁵ It seems to rest on as instable a basis as the same writers’ contention, endlessly repeated, that the Disruption so greatly weakened the position of the Established Church that it directly caused that state to secularise

⁸² D.B.A. Ansdell, “The 1843 Disruption of the Church of Scotland in the Isle of Lewis”, *ante*, xxiv (1991), 183-5.

⁸³ *People in the Pews*, 13.

⁸⁴ Drummond and Bulloch, *Scottish Church, 1688-1843*, 261-2; *Church in Victorian Scotland*, 4; Brown, *People in the Pews*, 13.

⁸⁵ For example – C. Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism, 1707-1977* (London, 1977), 86ff.; M. Fry, *Patronage and Principle*, 55; P. Scott, “The last purely Scotch age” in *The History of Scottish Literature*, vol. 3: *Nineteenth Century*, ed. D. Gifford (Aberdeen, 1988), 7.

social welfare provision in poor relief and, later, in schooling. Yet the national church's influence in or supervisory control over the nation's schools was certainly already severely restricted in the 1820s and 1830s, as were its powers in the raising and management of the poor's funds; and in some areas where the Church *had* retained the management of poor funds, the new Poor Law Amendment Act of 1845 made precious little difference. There is still much to be said, too, for the argument that church influence in schooling – better still, the churches' influence in schooling – was considerably greater in the three decades after 1872 than in the three decades before.⁸⁶

In many respects we are still seeking the “real” history of the Disruption, both in its making and in its impact. As we have seen, each age comes to it with its own set of questions (and the kinds of answers it wishes to uncover), reflecting its own special concerns, searching for its own Disruption story or myriad versions of that story: and no doubt that will continue. Have we now perhaps done with the “great men” of the time? Are fiercely-researched local studies now the best way forward? Is close examination of the politicking of 1837-42, and later too, likely to be a more revealing prospect? Or perhaps a detailed investigation of the inner battles and organisational struggles within the pre-Disruption church? Should we be anxious to discover why some 260 “old” Evangelicals stayed in the Establishment in May 1843 – for if they had gone out, then the dominance of the Free Church must have been assured, with all that might have followed? Apart from Callum Brown's welcome pamphlet, the 150th anniversary year of the Disruption has seen two other publications which may be used to point the way forward in the next phase of investigation. The ten essays in *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, edited by Stewart Brown and Michael Fry, are fresh, wide-ranging and well-supplied with hints for future study; and Professor Alec Cheyne has us in his debt again for a crisp and clear lecture on *The Ten Years' Conflict and the Disruption: an overview*, pointing the way to further questions and enquiries. It is

⁸⁶ D.J. Withrington, “Towards a national system, 1867-72: the last years in the struggle for a Scottish Education Act”, *Scottish Educational Studies*, iv (1972), 107-24; and “The 1872 Education Act: a centenary retrospect”, *Education in the North*, ix (1972), 5-9.

to be hoped that together these publications will help to usher in a new and fruitful era in Disruption studies.

